

CANADA

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Abraham Lincoln and Foreign Countries

Canada

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Abraham Lincoln's Canadian encounters

pressrepublican.com

November 16, 2012 Steven Spielberg's epic film on Abraham Lincoln may cause Canadians to reflect on what the Civil War meant on this side of the border. The accepted wisdom is the sight of Americans slaughtering each other over states' rights — one being the right to own slaves — was a wake-up call for early proponents of a federation of British North American colonies.

One of the few, perhaps the only, prominent Canadian politicians to have had a face-to-face with Lincoln while he was president was Alexander Galt, minister of finance for the province of Canada, then still a British colony combining what is now Ontario and Quebec.

Galt met Lincoln in Washington on Dec. 4, 1861, at a time when the war was escalating and tensions mounting with England because of the Trent Affair — the American navy had captured two Confederate envoys aboard a British ship.

Although Lincoln took pains to reassure Galt, the Canadian's notes suggest otherwise:

"The temper of the public mind toward England is certainly of doubtful character, and the idea is universal that Canada is most desirable for the North, while its unprepared state would make it an easy prize. The vast military preparations of the North must either be met by corresponding organization in the British provinces, or conflict, if it come, can have but one result."

Lincoln backed down in the Trent affair, releasing the captured Confederates, saying famously, "one war at a time." Galt, already sold on the necessity of uniting the British North American provinces, became an even more fervent advocate of a federation with a strong central government. (See my column of Aug. 12, 2011).

Later in the war, Lincoln had another notable Canadian visitor named Alexander, one whose role in history is murkier than Galt's. Alexander Milton Ross, raised in Belleville, Ontario, by an American-born abolitionist mother, vowed at an early age to do his part to fight slavery. In his memoirs, he describes how he moved to the United States when he was 17, studied medicine and worked for the abolitionist newspaper that first serialized Uncle Tom's Cabin.

In 1857, he embarked on a secret mission in the southern states to inform slaves how the Underground Railroad worked. He was known as "the Birdman" because he would tell plantation owners he was an ornithologist studying local birds.

He had many close scrapes with slave owners and bounty hunters as he helped slaves escape north. At one point, he was captured and brought before a judge in Mississippi but spared from execution at the last minute by the sudden appearance of the slave he was accused of helping flee.

Ross returned to Canada around 1859 and practiced medicine as the war south of the border loomed then broke out. He then was summoned to Washington, where word had spread of his exploits as a secretive liberator of slaves. One of his fans was Lincoln ally and Massachusetts abolitionist Sen. Charles Sumner (then nearly recovered from a near-fatal beating on the floor of the Senate.)

After a dinner in Ross's honor, Lincoln asked him to be his spy in Canada, keeping an eye on Confederate activities up north. Ross, who initially believed the president to be too soft on slavery, grew to understand the

complexity of his fearful position. The two shared several private conversations, and Ross developed a great admiration for Lincoln.

His secret-agent activities included intercepting a Confederate operative named Mrs. Williams on a train bound for the United States as she carried secret documents and correspondence. He brought the bundle to Lincoln in Washington, and overnight they pored over the documents, some of which hinted at an attack on Union forces in Maine.

Ross sped his way to the area and managed to avert the attack.

The exploits of Ross, as recounted in his memories, are so spectacular they have provoked denunciations by scholars. His later activities in a campaign against smallpox vaccination in Montreal may also have discredited him in the eyes of historians.

Regardless, he may still be one of the few prominent Canadians to have gone face to face with the Great Emancipator.



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cornwallseawaynews.com

First-ever U.S. Civil War monument going up to memorialize Canada's contribution

An artist's rendering of the new monument.

CORNWALL, Ontario - For the first time ever in Canada a monument will be erected to memorialize the more than 50,000 Canadian (British North American) veterans who volunteered and fought in the American Civil War.

And the monument is going up right in our backyard.

The Lost Villages Historical Society announced this week that the monument will be erected within Ault Park, on County Road 2, which also includes the Lost Villages Museum.

Jim Brownell, president of the Lost Villages Historical Society, said the monument will face the highway and become a focal point of the property.

The proposed 14-foot black granite obelisk will be paired with eight-foot black granite side stones and a small paved pedestrian walkway.

The historical society recently entered into an agreement with the Grays and Blues of Montréal (GBM) - a mid-19th century living history re-enactment association, to erect the monument.

The monument should be completed in time for the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation, which takes place July 1, 2017.

Over the bloody four-year American Civil War more than 50,000 volunteers from Ontario, Québec and the Maritimes travelled to various northern or southern U.S. cities, to enlist on either side of the battle lines.

By the end of the war more than 620,000 on both sides, including thousands of Canadians, were killed.

Some 34 Canadians on the federal side were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Today no war monument exists to commemorate and remember the Canadian volunteers.

Organizations: Lost Villages Historical Society, North American, Lost Villages Museum

Geographic location: U.S., Canada, Ontario Ault Park County Road Québec

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